

HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The article demonstrates English language grammar, the study of morphological word groups, their meaning, construction, grammatical categories and their functions

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INTRODUCTION

A brief history of the most widely used language in the world The English language is one of the linguistic success stories of the last five hundred years. If you're reading this article here on the EF English Live blog then you are one of the estimated 1 billion plus people who are studying the language worldwide.

English today: the language of work?

The British Council estimates that this exceptional peak in numbers learning English is due to the high percentage of adults using English as a language in the office.

The US, for whom English is the official native language, is the home of the world's biggest tech-cities and internet business, and so English is also, unofficially perhaps, the language of the web. Many can argue that it's also the language of capitalism, a concept which in itself grew up between a dialogue between US and English economic philosophies.

But enough of English today – what of its roots? Where did the English language come from? We'll take a brief step back in time to bring you some surprising facts and figures about the English language and its long past.

The three Englishes

In general, English language history is split into three sections: Old English, Middle English and Modern English.

Whilst linguists and scholars do hotly contest these labels, and exactly when or how each period begins, we can see a distinct change in the language over these three phases.

The first phase, Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, was a heavily Germanic language brought by the tribes which began migrating to the British Isles from Germany in the fifth century A.D. Old English still retains a few short words we can still recognise today (him; he – and derivatives of), but sentence construction and more complex vocabulary requires closer attention.

The second phase, Middle English, is so called because the rules of Anglo-Saxon find themselves systematically broken down and compromised by the various influences of Viking invasions, the Norman conquest (1066) and of course Latin, which was the language

of the church. We begin to find stronger influence from the Romance languages of mainland Europe, and a shift in the sound of the language.

Modern English is largely seen to begin in the 16th century and extend until today. It is marked by the 'Great Vowel Shift', which, supported by the invention of the printing press and the increasing technology for widespread communication (on paper and later, via radio) led to an elongating and settling of the vowel sounds and a standardising of the spoken language.

Let's take a little closer look at each period and some words that have come from them.

Old English

Anglo Saxon often has a bad reputation amongst linguists; it's seen as the least pretty and often the least poetic of the Englishes. Yet it is responsible for so much including the names England and English, which derive from the term Angles.

Here is a piece of text from Aelfric's 'Homily on St Gregory the Great' which tells the famous story of the pope sending missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons:

Eft he axode, hu ðære ðeode nama wære þe hi of comon. Him wæs geandwyrd, þæt hi Angle genemnode wæron. Þa cwæð he, "Rihtlice hi sind Angle gehatene, for ðan ðe hi engla wite habbað, and swilcum gedafenað þæt hi on heofonum engla geferan beon."

You might be able to recognise a few words in there – Angle we know means English. Also he, on and for are unchanged. And with 'comon' (common), 'waes' (was) 'rihtlice' (rightly) – perhaps we can see the contemporary equivalents of these words. Here is a translation of it, thanks to Merriam Webster:

Again he [St. Gregory] asked what might be the name of the people from which they came. It was answered to him that they were named Angles. Then he said, "Rightly are they called Angles because they have the beauty of angels, and it is fitting that such as they should be angels' companions in heaven."

Middle English

In Middle English we see the influence of Old Norse and Norman French coming to the front. Perhaps one of the significant influences of Old Norse on English was on the syntax and grammatical ordering of words. Just as the Vikings colonised Britain, so too the patterns of English grammar have much to thank north Germanic tongues, like Danish or Icelandic.

We see this most in the order and placement of verbs. English, Danish and Icelandic have similar patternings for the example phrase:

"I will never see you again"

= Danish "Jeg vil aldrig se dig igen"

= Icelandic "Ég mun aldrei sjá þig aftur"

...whereas in Dutch and German the main verb is placed at the end (e.g. Dutch "Ik zal je nooit weer zien"; German "Ich werde dich nie wieder sehen", literally, "I will you never again see").

We also see new words coming in from the French – words like nature, table, hour (heure). Indeed, French is responsible for much of the Modern English vocabulary.

Modern English

Modern English is widely regarded to begin in the 1500s and reach up to the present day. It takes its Germanic and Norse grammatical roots and pronouns and prepositions, adds in the extensive French and Latin-influenced vocabulary and combines this with an overwhelming harmonisation of vowel sounds, which approach something like the English sounds we know today.

The poetry of Shakespeare is a good example – not only would it rhyme to a sixteenth century ear, but it also rhymes to a twenty-first century ear; and that is thanks the gradual standardisation of the many different vowel sounds that influenced the language's composition.

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